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SCIENCE WATCH

Thalidomide Found to Ease Transplants

March 25, 1986
THE NEW YORK TIMES, TUESD
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HALIDOMIDE, the ill-fated sedative and tranquilizer that is seldom mentioned these days except as the classic example of drug tragedy, may have another limited chance at respectability.

In research with animals, scientists at Johns Hopkins University have found thalidomide promising as a preventive and as a treatment for graft versus host disease, the most severe complication of bone marrow transplantation. Except in marrow transplants between identical twins or perfectly matched siblings, graft versus host disease is often a deadly complication: The marrow makes a devastating immunological attack against the body into which it has been transplanted.

The Johns Hopkins scientists, led by Dr. Georgia Vogelsang, foundrats that 17 of 22 rats treated with thalidomide before bone marrow transplantation did not develop the disease and all but one of 23 other rats that already had the disease were saved. from it, according to a report to be published in the journal Transplantation in May.

The drug was tried because of longstanding evidence that it has a suppressive effect on immune activity. More than 20 years ago, thalidomide

use was halted because it caused severe birth defects in the babies of women who used it during pregnancy. Today it is sometimes used in treating leprosy, but its future possibilities are compromised by a shortage of the drug in a sufficiently pure form.

Do-Nothing Hummingbirds

Hummingbirds, the ultimate symbol of nervous energy, actually spend three-fourths of their days on a perch doing absolutely nothing. The reason, it appears, is that they need this time to process all the nectar they have ingested in their frenetic bouts of feeding. They must rest because they are too full to eat.

Appearances aside, the hummingbird spends most of the day doing nothing.

A study of Rufous and Anna's hummingbirds by Jared M. Diamond and others, reported in Nature, found that markers placed in sugars showed up in their excrement after only 15 minutes, and the average time through the body for all the markers was 49 minutes. The average for most birds, in contrast, is one to three hours, and for most mammals and lizards anywhere from two to 150 hours. Hummingbirds were able to extract about 97 percent of the glucose in the food.

Field observations indicate that Rufous hummingbirds feed for about one minute at a time, then rest about four minutes. The researchers concluded that the amount of feeding was limited by how quickly a bird could empty its crop, the part of the esophagus where consumed food is stored for release to the digestive tract.

A Living Fossil

As a rule, the fossil record leaves little doubt as to whether an animal or plant is extinct or alive, but every now and then a surprise turns up. One such surprise occurred in 1938, when fishermen off the coast of Africa caught a living coelacanth: a lobe-finned fish thought to have been extinct for 60 million years. Now another living fossil has come to light.

Reporting in the journal of the Paris Academy of Science, Dr. Michel Roux of the Université Claude Bernard Lyon has announced the discovery of a primitive animal of the subclass Inadunata of the sea lilies (crinoids). A relative of starfish and urchins, it had been believed extinct for 230 million years. As was the case with the modern-day coelacanth, the living crinoid (Guillecrinus reunionensis) had apparently evaded detection by inhabiting deep water. The five specimens caught by Dr. Roux off Réunion Island in the Indian Ocean were recovered at depths as great as 6,500 feet.

The finding seems certain to hearten cryptozoologists, who seek living specimens of supposedly extinct animals, including dinosaurs.

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THURSDAY
JANUARY 19, 1989
Hartford Courant
ADVANCES

Not a missing link

When scientists discovered a living coelacanth 50 years ago last month, they recognized it as belonging to a group of fishes thought to have been extinct for 80 million years and previously known only from fossils. The specimen, hooked by a fisherman, was quickly hailed as a "living fossil."

The coelacanth (pronounced see-la-kanth) had long been thought to represent an evolutionary transition from fishes to the first land animals. The newly caught coelacanth's fleshy fins, hinting at a resemblance to legs, helped earn it the label of missing link.

Today, however, there is a growing consensus among evolutionary biologists who have studied living specimens that coelacanths are not missing links. According to a recent report in the British journal Nature, the features of the coelacanth that generally link the fish to land animals are probably only coinci-

dentally similar, writes Peter L. Forey of the British Museum (Natural History). For one thing, fossil coelacanths were thought to have lungs, like several species of lungfish today. These lungs allow lungfish to live out of water for long periods. The structure, thought to have been the precursor of lungs in early amphibians, evolved into the swim bladder of the more advanced fishes. But living coelacanths, found off Madagascar, have no lungs.

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'Creature'
Baffling
Biologists
NAIROBI, Kenya
(UPI)
Should
fisherman Mohamed
Sefu's catch be
biologically
classified
as a fish that crawls or a
lizard that swims?
Whatever it is, it has
arms, legs and fingers
has excited fishermen in
the Kilwa area of
southern Tanzania.
The Tanzanian press
reported that Sefu
netted the fish-like
creature of a type never
previously seen in the
See CREATURE, page 2

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teatment to Japan and Czecho-
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This protective clause, coupled
with the hope of drawing Poland
closer into the Western camp h
virtue of GATT membership.
gives Poland a fairly good
chance to gain membership, ob-
servers here believe.
Poland has stated its recogni
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hooked it on a long line from
a row boat in Cardigan Bay, in
Wales..
The fishermen kept it alive
in the water-filled bottom of
their boat and took it to the
local fish expert at Abersoch,
Wales.
The expert, Evan Hughes,
said he had never seen anything
like it and that officials of the
government fisheries office would
to Abersoc.. to exam-
come
ine it
The fish has a dark brown
body with front fins resembling
a skates, a flat head measuring
about Binches, slit eyes shaped
like half moons, a tail, and rear
fins like those of a dogfish-and
those lege
Arctic Sport
E kimos in Alasks have
popular sport called naiakutuk,

or blanket tessing. A tough walnis skin is used for the blanket, and the contestant is tossed high In the air. The winner is the one who can land and stay on his teet

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Marjorie Courtenay-Latimer, Naturalist, Is Dead at 97
By JEREMY PEARCE
Marjorie Courtenay-Latimer, a self-trained South African naturalist who in 1938 discovered the coelacanth, a species of bony, four-finned fish often described as a living fossil, died on May 17 in East London, South Africa. She was 97.
A cause of death was not determined, although she had suffered a series of falls, said Susan L. Jewett, a researcher for the Smithsonian Institution who recently visited her.
The story of Ms. Courtenay-Latimer's discovery remains among the most famous in the annals of modern biology. She was a young curator at the East London. Museum when, on Dec. 22, 1938, she spotted the coelacanth in a pile of fish on a vessel at the town's dock. After taking steps to preserve the 127-pound fish, she sent a quick sketch to South Africa's leading fish expert, Dr. J. L. B. Smith of Rhodes University.
"With that action, Courtenay-Latimer became the point person and den mother for all who were to study the fish," said Dr. Keith S. Thomson, professor emeritus of natural history at Oxford University and author of the book "Living Fossil: The Story of the Coelacanth" (1991).
Dr. Thomson compared the discovery to finding a lost dinosaur on a South American plateau or a pterodactyl in the Everglades. Before Ms. Courtenay-Latimer's discovery, the coelacanth was thought to have been extinct for at least 70 million years. As a living species, it is believed to hold a unique place in the evolution-

ary chain from fish to land verte-
Noted for finding a
living fossil, a fish
thought long extinct.
brates. Early theories that held that
the fish might be a direct ancestor of
humankind were disproved by stud-
ies in the 1980's of the coelacanth's
anatomy and DNA.
"We continually ask, how can this
fish have evolved so little?" Dr.
Thomson said.
Recalling her discovery, Ms. Cour-
tenay-Latimer later wrote: "I saw a
blue fin and, pushing off the fish, the
most beautiful fish I had ever seen
was revealed. It was five feet long
and a pale mauve blue with irides-
East London (South Africa) Museum Archives
cent silver markings." She added, Marjorie Courtenay-Latimer in 1939 with the coelacanth she found.
"This I will definitely take to the mu-
seum.
The second coelacanth was caught
14 years later, in 1952, in the Indian
Ocean off the Comoro Islands after
an international effort by Dr. Smith
to find more specimens of the fish.
Some 200 coelacanths have been cap-
tured since, leading to a call to study
the fish in its environment and to
preserve the species. Several were
found off the South African coast last
month.
The significance of the coelacanth
continues to unfold.
Dr. William E. Bemis, an evolu-
tionary biologist at the University of
Massachusetts, Amherst, said stud-
ies of the fish's eye muscles, used to
close its jaws, had provided impor-
tant links to how similar muscles in
frogs and vertebrates worked. Other
studies have shown that the fish pos-
sesses within its snout an electrosen-
sory organ, the rostral organ, which
scientists have determined is proba-
bly used to find prey.
Marjorie Courtenay-Latimer was
born Feb. 24, 1907, the daughter of a
railroad accountant who moved the
family to stations throughout South
Africa. While still a child, she began

a collection of bird eggs and insects.
She was educated at a convent school and intended to train as a nurse, but became curator at the East London Museum in 1931, a position she held until 1973. She never married.
Although best known for her discovery of the coelacanth, Ms. Courtenay-Latimer had a broader interest in natural history, and also wrote about wildflowers.
In 1971, she received an honorary doctorate from Rhodes University.
In 1998, she was a guest of honor when the South African government unveiled a gold coin minted to commemorate the coelacanth's discovery. Ms. Courtenay-Latimer's scientific collaborator, Dr. Smith, named the species after her, Latimeria chalumnae.
Ms. Courtenay-Latimer is survived by two nieces and a nephew.

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